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'Bunch of Sitting Ducks'

Spies: British Mess a Rival for Fiction

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LONDON—In the past few weeks, Britain's intelligence services have appeared to be so riddled with security risks that spy fiction pales by comparison.

Authors John Le Carre or Len Deighton would have been hard put to come up with plots indicating:

—That a Soviet "mole" was operating in the nation's top-secret radio-monitoring apparatus.

—That a Canadian professor assigned to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization gave the Soviet Union thousands of documents and even had lunch with Yuri V. Andropov, now the Soviet Union's top leader and until not long ago head of its KGB secret police.

—That a female British diplomat, in pillow talk with an Egyptian official, leaked the substance of confidential telegrams.

—That a young lance corporal in the intelligence service was arrested for undisclosed security violations.

—That a naval captain on the staff of the Soviet Embassy here was expelled for attempting to gain the secrets of the British Falkland Islands war campaign.

'Bunch of Sitting Ducks'

As a London Daily Mail editorial put it: "We look like a bunch of sitting ducks in a perilous world of professional hunters."

And a cartoon in the London Evening Standard showed a British security chief declaring: "I think we're getting on top of it, Carruthers. It's been nearly 24 hours since we've found a spy in our ranks."

Is Britain's intelligence apparatus more susceptible to penetration by foreign agents than those of other Western countries? Or could it be that the British are simply better at catching spies than the United States, France or West Germany?

The questions trouble officials high in the British government—as well as those in the governments of allied countries that share intelligence material with the United Kingdom.

U.S. Agents Write Books

As an aide in the prime minister's office grumbled: "We catch our spies. Your American lot simply publish books."

Many British senior officials believe that, while they have uncovered occasional Soviet spies in their own midst, the Americans have given away valuable secrets in the various accounts published by former CIA directors as well as by lesser officers in the U.S. intelligence service.

However, the gaps now appearing in the British security system call attention to the fact that clearance procedures tend to be less rigorous in Britain than in the United States.

For instance, British intelligence officers do not need to take lie detector tests, a common procedure in the more sensitive U.S. security agencies. Personnel evaluations carried out in some sensitive British agencies reportedly sometimes involve merely asking a few friends of the official whether there are any incriminating experiences in his or her background.

Still, as one senior U.S. diplomat in London put it last week: "Sure, we are worried about this recent account of the breakdown in the British security system. But it probably is not as bad as it looks in the press. However, the problem—in terms of our future relationship—is how this is viewed back in Washington by Congress."

The central fact about Western intelligence is that the British and the Americans have long been among the two closest allies in the world.

Though not much is said about it, the CIA's London station chief sits in on weekly meetings of the British Joint Intelligence Board, which includes representatives of the Foreign Office, the Secret Intelligence Service (also known as MI-6), the Security Service (also called MI-5), and the various military intelligence branches.

That relationship dates back to World War II, when the British helped provide the expertise for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, under Gen. William J. Donovan. The OSS was the U.S. intelligence-gathering operation during World War II and subsequently evolved into the CIA.

What worries key intelligence officers on both sides of the Atlantic appears to be that gaps in the British security system might hinder the exchange of vital intelligence information between London and Washington.

Each of the countries has its own strengths in the intelligence field and each depends on the other.

A retired chief of British intelligence said recently:

"The CIA has a much broader scope to its activities and has a much larger staff and much more resources. But British intelligence tends to have its own value—that is to say it can focus on a single subject, from day to day, I think, better than the CIA.

"We apply a rather more flexible approach and we are probably, on the spot, more relevant, day by day, because we bring our whole machine to bear on that one spot. Thus, I dare say our government gets an up-to-date assessment every day during any given crisis."

In the most recent rash of publicized security violations in England, the most dangerous, in the view of the intelligence community, was that of Geoffrey Prime, a translator and later a division official in the top-secret General Communications Headquarters.

This is the British organization that corresponds to the National Security Agency of the United States. It intercepts communications from all over the world, although its chief target is Soviet radio broadcasts. Prime is a linguist whose job was to translate intercepted Russian-language communications.

For years, he was linked to a Soviet spy network and was able to provide the Soviets with what the British were learning about Soviet troop dispositions and, perhaps more importantly, to tell them how that information was obtained.

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